

**OVERCOMING LIMITS TO CONSENSUS-BUILDING
ON ENERGY AND CLIMATE:
TOXIC PARTISANSHIP, US VERSUS THEM, FALSE POLARIZATION**

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Study in Brief

“Net zero emissions by 2050” has quickly gained acceptance across partisan lines. Taking Canada’s political parties at their word, this is a hugely promising development. Yet in recent years, politicians have built entire electoral campaigns around promises to undo or fight energy infrastructure decisions and policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Incoming governments have largely delivered on those promises.

Figuring out how to meet Canada’s emissions targets while making progress on the equally vital, interconnected challenges of energy security, reconciliation, and regulatory reform, will require reducing the political and policy whiplash of recent years. How to start proactively building consensus around net zero and the difficult infrastructure and policy decisions that await? Can partisan politics play a more constructive role in this mission?

Against this backdrop, this study headlines Positive Energy’s research on the models of and limits to consensus-building. It uses multiple data sources, including documentary analysis, literature reviews and in-depth interviews with 50 Canadian environmental and energy leaders to answer two research questions:

1. How did Canadian climate and energy issues come to be polarized along partisan lines?
2. What can be done to reduce, mitigate or navigate partisan polarization and enable/facilitate/build consensus?

Key Findings

Two major findings emerge from this study.

First, several compounding drivers have contributed to the polarization of various climate and energy issues along partisan lines. This study identifies 11 drivers, clustered around two broad themes. The most thematically prominent drivers in the interview data were political leaders, misinformation, the gap between public opinion and decision-maker opinion, and correlations between partisanship, ideology and geography. Major polarizing events include the 2008 federal election, the National Energy Program, and the Kyoto Protocol.

Second, this study identifies three common drivers of polarization that function as limits to consensus-building, and offers insights on how to overcome them based on participant input and scholarly literature:

1. Toxic partisanship (dislike for partisan opponents to the point where civility and bipartisanship become difficult or impossible)
2. Negative affect (dislike or hatred for out-groups, including but not limited to partisan out-groups; often associated with “us versus them” thinking)
3. False polarization (incorrect perceptions of the extent of polarization).

These limits affect far more policy areas than just climate change and energy. There were also fundamental divergences among interviewees on the subject of consensus-building, including whether consensus is a desirable outcome for climate and energy policy, and the extent to which consensus has ever existed.

Discussion and Implications

Overcoming polarization, including partisan polarization, is not a simple task. A long sequence of political and social events has brought us to this point, but decision-makers looking to seize the current political consensus on net-zero by 2050 have options. **Non-partisan**, and more importantly, **cross-partisan** approaches to decision-making and dialogue are two promising approaches. While it is easier to polarize than it is to build consensus, emerging social psychology literature offers a number of promising strategies to combat this asymmetry and instill public confidence on the way to net zero.

Relevance for Decision-Makers

By offering a mix of specific policies that are less vulnerable to partisan polarization and tactics that can be used to overcome or navigate through polarized contexts, this study aims to equip decision-makers for the challenges ahead.

The post-COVID paradigm on federal energy and climate policy is in its early stages. This analysis suggests there are several building blocks that can serve as the basis for cross-partisan collaboration and policy development:

1. Cross-party consensus on net zero emissions by 2050 (or sooner)
2. Consensus on market-based policies like industrial carbon pricing, with some disagreement on the price path and use of revenues; the consensus on retail carbon pricing remains vulnerable
3. Consensus on clean tech broadly, with reasonable consensus among Liberals and Conservatives on energy sources like natural gas, next-generation nuclear and blue hydrogen

Capitalizing on the current cross-partisan consensus around net zero by 2050 also requires an understanding of how groups polarize. In addition to reviewing the scholarly literature on polarization, this study provides insights into how certain Canadian decision-makers perceive their ideological or political counterparts on the issues of energy and climate, and the extent to which they are willing (or not) to compromise. A minority of participants (8 of 50) believed we have never had consensus on energy and climate issues and that consensus is not necessarily desirable on these issues. This perspective reflects the challenge of polarized contexts: a minority who either believe that certain ideological or political positions are unworthy of negotiation or compromise.

[Link to the full report](#)